



BONUS CASE STUDY: LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN COALITION AND BEYOND

Events

The Liberal Democrats entered government for the first time in 100 years, when it joined as the junior partner in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of 2010 to 2015. The experience of coalition government proved to be deeply testing for the Liberal Democrats. The party's vote collapsed in 2015, when it held on to just eight seats and the party leader, Nick Clegg, stood down. The 2017 election with Tim Farron as leader, followed closely by the 2019 election with Jo Swinson as leader, were both similarly electorally disastrous for the Liberal Democrats. This left the Liberal Democrats, in 2020, with its fourth leader in five years and the need to reposition itself within UK Politics.

Significance

In Coalition, by abandoning their economic strategy in order to support the Conservative approach to deficit reduction, the party gave the Conservatives political cover in this crucial and controversial area, while also failing to receive appropriate credit for policies that they had instigated (such as increases in the income tax threshold) or for having constrained the Conservatives in important areas. The Liberal Democrats were also defeated in their attempt to deliver meaningful constitutional reform, in relation to both the Westminster electoral system and the House of Lords. In many ways, the Liberal Democrat leadership's decision in December 2010 to abandon the party's opposition to university tuition fees summed up the predicament that so often confronts junior partners in a coalition government: they get insufficient reward for the coalition's successes and disproportionate condemnation for its failures. This U-turn also sparked an electoral decline from which the Liberal Democrats never recovered.

Once it became clear that the Conservatives had won a Commons majority in 2015, and all prospects of a continuation of the Coalition had evaporated, Clegg stood down as Liberal Democrat leader. His successor, Tim Farron, had not, as the Liberal Democrat President, held office during the Coalition, and is widely considered to be closer to the party's centre-left heritage than to its 'Orange Book' wing. However, he has been careful not to repudiate participation in the Coalition, as, to do so, would be to risk destroying the party's credibility altogether. However, and ironically, the 'Leave' victory in the 2016 EU referendum opened up opportunities for a possible revival of the Liberal Democrats. Traditionally the most pro-European party in the UK, the Liberal Democrats, under Farron, positioned themselves as the 'party of the 48 per cent', the percentage of the electorate that supported 'Remain' in the referendum. The centrepiece of the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the June 2017 General Election was thus the pledge to hold a second referendum on the final Brexit deal. If this were defeated, the UK would remain a member of the EU. The 2017 election result did not bring the returns the party expected, and Vince Cable took over as leader before standing down in 2019. In 2019, under Jo Swinson, the party positioned itself as the only major party that would cancel Brexit, and use the Brexit bonus from the economic boost from remaining in the EU, to pledge significant spending and investment pledges. Despite its biggest ever war chest to spend, the party only raised its vote share by 4% and won only 11 seats, one fewer than in 2017. The decision to pledge to revoke Brexit, without a referendum, was considered even by Remainers to be problematic and even undemocratic.